

Health-based approach may help ID groups at risk of genocide

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Researchers from North Carolina State University are proposing a health-based approach to identifying groups at high risk of genocide, in a first-of-its-kind attempt to target international efforts to stop these mass killings before they start.

Genocide, or the willful attempt to exterminate a specific population, is a violation of international law. In recent years, international discussion of genocide has focused in part on finding ways to identify populations at risk in order to prevent a problem before it starts.

Some [risk factors](#) have already been identified, such as severe state oppression of a group or a regional history of genocide. Now researchers are offering a new risk factor for consideration: a population's health and its track record of [prenatal care](#).

"This is a data-driven approach that we developed by analyzing the remains of genocide victims. There can be no confusion or claims of inaccurate reporting from third parties. The bodies of the victims speak for themselves," says Dr. Ann Ross, professor of [anthropology](#) at NC State and co-author of a paper on the research and proposed risk factor. This effort marks the first time researchers have used skeletal analysis to assess the overarching health of genocide victims before their murder.

Ross and her co-author, former NC State graduate student Ashley Maxwell, began by analyzing remains of Bosnian Muslims from the Srebrenica massacre – where 8,000 men and boys were killed in 1995.

Ross is a forensic anthropologist and worked extensively in the Balkans during the late 1990s to help identify the remains of genocide victims.

The researchers found that the Srebrenica victims had an unusually high frequency of malnutrition, poor health and inadequate prenatal care. For example, the victims had a high rate of spina bifida, which is directly related to poor nutrition and prenatal care.

"These conditions are good indicators of genocide risk because they illustrate the population's marginalized status," Ross says.

The researchers also examined epidemiological data from the World Health Organization on the general health of refugees from Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Those data were consistent with the forensic assessment of the Srebrenica victims.

"This gives politicians and international bodies another tool that can be used to identify – and protect – populations facing [genocide](#)," Ross says. "We need to prevent these mass murders, not sit on our hands wondering when to take action."

More information: The paper, "Epidemiology of Genocide: An Example from the Former Yugoslavia," will be published in the fall issue of *Forensic Science Policy and Management*.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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